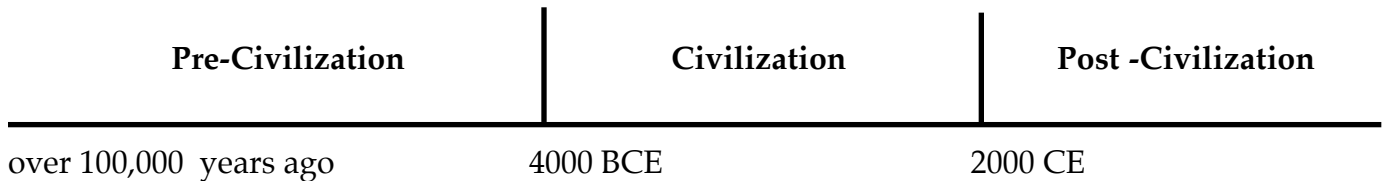


Chapter 11

Beyond Civilization

It is typical for people to believe that the mode of society we currently have is the only viable possibility for our future; but as introduced in the last chapter, we now must consider that a viable society for our particular future needs a significantly different mode of society than the mode we have called “civilization.” So I am going to consider further the possibility that we are **not** being challenged to **save civilization**, but to **build post-civilization**. What does this mean? Here is a chart that helps us hold three basic eras of human history in our minds:



That chart assumes that so far in the history of our species we have constructed two basic modes of society. Small *tribal societies* were the first; *civilizations* were the second. Now a third mode of society is required. We don't know yet what name to call this third basic mode of social living. “Post-civilization” is not a name; it is just a marker for this unnamed future. It will be my contention that neither of the first two modes of society will handle the challenges of the coming era.

For several centuries we have been in a period of transition between civilization and post-civilization. The eighteenth century democratic revolutions and the thinking that led up to them were near the beginning of this huge transition. The abolition of slavery has also been part of this transition. The labor movements, the women's movements, and the civil rights movements continue to expand this transition. The ecological movements are also movements reaching toward this third mode of human society.

The transition between pre-civilization and civilization also took place over a period of time. This transition began perhaps 10,000 years ago with the transition from complete hunter-gathering societies to settled gardening villages. Full blown agriculture and cities that distributed agricultural surpluses marked the dawn of civilization. Hierarchical arrangements of power, centralized priesthoods, royalty, and standing armies characterized a full blown civilization.

Tribal society has been a mode of society that has characterized over 94 percent of the history of our species. We developed this mode of society in close association with our biological evolution. For perhaps a thousand centuries, this mode of society enabled our survival and nurtured us in the basic adventure of being human. Tribal societies still survive and nurture people (wherever civilizations allow tribal groups to have an adequate habitat in which to live).

Tribal people quite often view civilization as a mistake – as an oppressive and ruthless reality that should never have begun. They see the current reality of civilization as catastrophic to the natural world and to the human species. Many tribal people feel it is time for civilized people to learn from tribal people how to live.


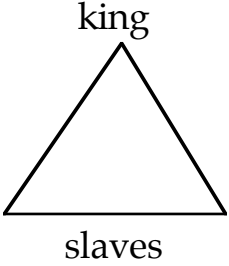
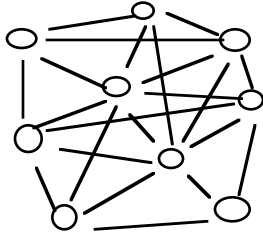
Such a view is surprising to most civilized people, *for it has been the standard view of civilized people that they were a huge advance over tribal society*. To support this view they note how civilizations have moved beyond tribal parochialism into wider perspectives on the world, as well as better technologies, greater sophistication, greater organization of the power to do things, greater prosperity (at least for some), and in the best of times to the discovery of new depths of consciousness.

Tribal people point out how civilizations have also resulted in a loss of consciousness, a loss of connection with the natural world, a loss of sensitivity to the emotional core of humanness and the magic of living within these deep connections.

But however fine the best of tribal life may have been, we cannot simply set aside the 6000 years or so of civilization. We the human species are now different. We cannot undo this difference. We must think of going forward. But we must do more than go forward to a better form of civilization. And we must do more than go forward to some new form of tribal life. *Our only realistic option is to go forward to a form of social life that is so different from anything that has ever existed before that it cannot be understood as a new form of civilization nor as a new tribalism.* Both tribal societies and civilizations have gifts and lessons that are important for our future, but both modes of social organization are inadequate to handle that impending future. We need something fundamentally new, an innovation in social mode that will become the third major form of human social organization.

The chart on the next page sketches some of the qualities of this third mode of human society and compares them with the civilization mode of society and the tribal mode of society. I want to place in our minds this master image and then elaborate upon it in a few paragraphs. The chart holds the presupposition that our core imperative is not making some minor improvements on the societies we have known in the past, but conducting a master overhaul in human social living.

Three Modes of Human Society

Pre-Civilization	Civilization	Post-civilization
Tribal Intimacy 	Hierarchical Order 	Planetary Confederation 
Companionality	Aristocracy / Commoners	Full Democracy
Natural Roles	Male Rule	Male / Female Balance
Nature Honoring	All-out Use of the Earth	Ecological Design
Boundary Maintenance	All-out Warfare	Negotiation and Restraint
Isolated Diversity	Uniformity	Interactive Diversity
Social Identification	Collectivism / Individualism	Interdependent Mutuality
Isolated Autonomy	Centralized Power	Local Empowerment
Local Enmeshment	Mobile Expansion	Grounding in Life Regions

Each one of the words in this chart can call to our minds a potentially controversial issue. Some readers may want to view these matters quite a bit differently. And certainly I agree that there are fine points, misunderstandings, and opposing views that need to be thoroughly aired. But in this chapter I am only going to write a short description of each row of this chart. I do not hope to end all debate nor to conclude the discussion on these topics. My aim here is to construct an overall picture that serves to define more carefully the direction in which the term "post-civilization" might be pointing. Some of the details alluded to in this chapter will be taken up later and more thoroughly discussed. All of these matters will need to be still further discussed over many decades to come.

Full Democracy

Civilization might be characterized as an experiment with hierarchical order. The tribal societies of pre-civilization did not have kings and queens. They did not have an aristocracy and commoners. They had leadership, but that leadership was a role sustained by a group of people who were willing to follow it. Tribal chiefs did not order their troops into battle; they sat down in talking circles with their fellow tribesmen (and often tribeswomen) and talked until they had a consensus about what to do. Civilizational hierarchy had some advantages; it provided a way for more people and more cultural resources from many diverse tribes to come together in more powerful social arrangements. This not only resolved issues concerning the defense of their land from enemies; it also made possible many vast cultural achievements and further deepening of consciousness.

But from the beginning the civilizational mode of society had drawbacks. It established an ongoing underclass of oppressed peasants and slaves. Even in its recent quasi-democratic forms, the lowly wage earner has often been devoid of significant power. The moneyed aristocracy has controlled democratic processes to an extent that is seldom acknowledged.

Post-civilization means movement away from *aristocratic rulership* toward full democracy.

Male/Female Balance

In the earliest centuries of civilization, nature priesthoods held civilizations in close contact with their tribal roots. In tribal antiquity males did not disparage or idealize women as patriarchal civilizations have done. But as the kings and their male armies came to dominate civilizations, the religious and cultural sensitivities also changed. With the idolization of the powers of civilization itself, male rulers took on a sort of divinity. Women lost status, sometimes sinking almost to the level of cattle. In the best of patriarchal times, women were merely required to shape their feminine nature to conform to male ideals. With such oppressive developments, patriarchy, as defined by our women's movements, came into being.

Post-civilization means movement away from *male rule* toward a society in which men and women have full equality and operate in full partnership in all aspects of social life.

Ecological Design

Tribal societies formed their economic patterns in very close harmony with the natural world. This was not entirely conscious; it was more like an unquestioned tradition inherited from the whole of primate evolution. But with the ever more sophisticated developments in agriculture, stock domestication, tools, techniques, and organization modes, civilizations became capable of greater control over nature and of detaching, to a greater extent, their social canopy from the ups and downs of nature. Within what we have called "industrial civilizations," this trend has led to a deep form of alienation from nature. Also, industrial civilizations have acquired the power to control nature to such an extent that basic natural systems can be greatly altered, even permanently altered to the detriment of the entire future of human life and the life of millions of other highly conscious species.

Post civilization means movement away from *all-out use of the Earth* toward an intentional and effective balance between human well-being and the well-being of the entire community of living beings.

Negotiation and Restraint

Tribal life was not characterized by all-out warfare as we have seen it practiced in almost every century in the era of civilization. Warfare in primitive tribal times was almost a ritual. And it was focused on boundary maintenance of a very practical sort. Without settled villages, it was fairly easy for tribes to simply separate from one another rather than fight to the death. Civilizations, however, have had to defend land from other expansion-minded civilizations. This resulted in a felt need for large standing armies. Military forces were also needed to hold civilizations together and to keep peasants and slaves in their assigned place. Civilizations have also been inclined to become what we have called "imperial," expanding into neighboring lands, driving tribal societies to the margins and conducting horrific warfare with other civilizations. This expansiveness forced previously tribal areas of the planet to become civilizations in order to defend their land. All-out warfare has characterized the entire period of civilization. It characterizes it to this day.

But now in this age of atomic power, biological agents, chemical agents, and super technology, all-out warfare no longer produces clear victors and clear losers on clear battlefields. To a large extent all have become losers in this form of warfare. Military restraints on genocidal and/or chaotic situations are still appropriate, but these military actions require moderation and they are becoming more than ever before the means of last resort. And the various means of settling disputes through negotiations are being ever more highly developed.

Post-civilization means movement toward doing away with *all-out warfare* and movement toward a planet-wide community which restrains all-out warfare and solves conflicts in peaceful ways.

Interactive Diversity

Tribal societies were and still are diverse, manifesting many different ways of coming at being human. In the pre-civilization era this diversity was extremely isolated. Most groups never knew of one another. Tribes that were proximate did interact with each other, but they did not meld. They did not feel strong pressures toward uniformity. And within the canopy of their isolated cultural sameness, a wide diversity of people and practices were and are tolerated.

Civilizations, however, massed many tribal groups together and created a cultural melting pot within which an ideal of overarching uniformity was required of all members. Uniformity was one of the means of social cohesion. Though different criteria applied to different classes, all members of the society were often expected to speak one language, to use one medium of exchange, to support the same overall social goals, and within a rather narrow latitude worship in the same way. What we now call "racism" as well as cultural and religious "bigotry" is rooted in this insistence on uniformity and on the internalization of that insistence in individual persons. Tribal societies were parochial and in that sense prejudiced, but the strong forms of racism and cultural bigotry came into being through the building of uniform civilizations. Extreme cultural tensions frequently existed between civilizations, often to the point of viewing an opposing civilization (or tribal group) as less than human. Similarly, strong tensions were created between the classes of the same civilization.

Today, the great cities of the world all teem with many cultures of people and this is spreading to rural areas as well. Contemporary transportation and communications bind the entire planet together in a manner never before experienced. These diversities are becoming and need to become mutually enhancing rather than conflictual. The old notion of a Christian

nation, Jewish nation, Muslim nation, Hindu nation, or any other religious or culturally defined exclusivity is becoming untenable.

Post-civilization means movement away from racism and other oppressive *uniformities* that demean “other” groups for their racial, cultural, or religious differences. This means moving toward the full honoring of our ever-present and interacting diversities.

Interdependent Mutuality

Tribal society produced strong individuals, but being a strong individual meant being the whole society in an exemplary fashion. A deep differentiation between the individual and the society was not made. But with the advent of civilization, a strong distinction was made between the collective and the individual. Strong individuals created the collective fabrics of the civilization and then forced the other members of that society to fit in. But there were always undercurrents of revolt against these collective pressures, and those undercurrents took the form of an individualism that did not exist in tribal society. These undercurrents of revolt took on even deeper forms in what has been called the “axial” movements of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucian and Greek philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and others. In all these movements within highly formulated civilizations, the individual was discovered to be a being that did not fit into the social collectivity, but was an experience of or a relationship with an overarching Reality that was more than the cultural canopy of civilization. After the advent of these axial movements, deep tensions existed between signal individuals and the collective qualities of society.

In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries of Western civilization, the Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation emphasized the life of the individual person and the autonomy of the individual rational mind to an extent that broke the molds of medieval collectivism. Today our primary imbalance in Western societies is individualism not collectivism. The attempt of communist movements to restore the collective side of this polarity failed in part because of the strength of the individual emphasis in modern society.

Now we are faced with the need to build community among strong individuals, a community that does not minimize the importance of the solitary individual but recognizes that no person is an island. Each of us exists in mutually enhancing interdependence with all other persons, as well as with the entire natural community of living forms.

Post-civilization means movement away from individualistic overemphasis toward cooperative alliances, interdependent patterns of living, and mutually enhancing responsibilities for all beings.

Local Empowerment

Civilization was the birth of centralized power. Tribal societies were isolated local groups living in almost complete autonomy in relation to other tribal groups. Centralization enabled the organization of larger societies and the development of larger cities. The great city became the center with its rays of trade and information reaching out into the peripheries of the rural surroundings. Top-down and center-out became the flow of power. All the big decisions were made at the center, or if you pictured this as a pyramid, at the top.

Decentralization of power has become an important theme in current discourse. One reason is that societies and business institutions have become so large and so complex that many

important decisions can no longer be made at the center. Many subcenters are needed for a smooth operation to take place. The rise of democracy has also tended to give emphasis to the local voter and local community and the natural region in which that voter lives. And thirdly, top-down, center-out, hierarchical structures are seen to be oppressive of individual creativity and worth.

But decentralization need not mean the absence of all power at the larger scopes of social organization. A healthy form of decentralization is realistic about the need for local persons to work together locally and then for local groups to confederate regionally and then for regional groups to confederate continentally and then for continental groups to confederate in a planetary fashion. Healthy decentralization might be pictured as globalization from below rather than globalization from above, as currently practiced by the transnational corporations and their governmental lackeys.

Post-civilization means movement away from our excessive *centralization* of political and economic power and working toward the empowerment of local communities with the capability of shaping their common lives and becoming the core cells of regional, continental, and planetary confederations of mutually enhancing entities.

Grounding in Life Regions

Very early, humanity became a mobile species moving from continent to continent across the entire planet, but the daily life of primitive tribal groups was grounded in some local place. Early tribal societies were almost as enmeshed as non-human species in some local natural region of the planet. The species of plants and animals that lived there were often seen as relatives, members of the family, companions in the organization of everyday life.

Civilization introduced greater mobility for its citizens, for its explorers, and for its conquering and defending armies. Industrial civilization has intensified this mobility to the uttermost, making it possible for people to travel throughout the planet. Across their lifetimes most citizens of developed industrial societies experience many residences in many different regions of the planet. This mobility has tended to make many members of modern societies almost completely uprooted from natural places. They typically have little knowledge of and little responsible participation in the places where they live. This exacerbates the tendency in civilized life to separate people from the natural world and to cocoon them in human-made cocoons. This, in turn, makes it difficult or even impossible to form an ecologically sustainable society.

One of the deepest transformative directions that is being proposed for our future societies is the reinhabitation of our local regions of the planet. Instead of considering states and counties and zip-code districts as our definitions of home, people are learning to leap up out of those humanly designed districts and land on the natural planet in one of its naturally defined regions. These regions are understood to be our homes that we learn to know and love and for which we assume responsibility. These regional homes are understood to be in mutually enhancing relations with all the other regional homes throughout the planet.

Post-civilization means movement away from our rootless, excessive *mobility* and learning to “marry” our local communities and natural regions and take responsibility for them.

These eight transitions provide a sense of what “post-civilization” means. More transitions could be described. More rows could be added to the above chart. Each of these transitions can be discussed further, and most will be discussed further in this book. My aim in this chapter is

simply painting in broad strokes the overall image of what it means to move beyond civilization to a viable post-civilizational era.

Civilization is failing. Ecological collapse and grueling poverty are key signs of that failure. Only a third mode of society will provide the context within which humanity can provide answers to the grim challenges that confront us.

A Spirit-based ethics will face these vast challenges and act realistically, step by step, over decades and centuries, toward realizing these vast transitions in the common practice of ordinary people. And a Spirit-based ethics is open to embrace still other transitions as they appear in the flow of history and as they become fresh challenges to which still more unprecedented responses are required.